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CORRESPONDENCE

THE DECLINE OF GREEK

To the Editor of the School Review:

MY DEAR SIR: There is no doubt that the study of Greek is on the wane. Matriculation for college is complete without it, and its consequent loss in secondary schools is coincident with its introduction to the college course as a freshman elective. The causes assigned for this state of affairs are as various as the sources whence they emanate. The advance in science, aided by the commercial appeal in the practical application of results; the national disinclination to leisure and culture, and our impatience with the subjects not immediately useful; the eager pursuit of short and easy roads to wisdom—these and more appear as causes from time to time. But such explanations are only partially true, because they are the external conditions to which the study has been exposed.

Years ago the study of the ancient languages was solemnly begun (and this is still true in many of the schools with a too venerable tradition) with the memorizing of a mass of abstract rules under which fell with mechanic precision shattered sentences from model writers who straightway with honest human perversity delighted to plead for the exception. That memorizing of undigested rules has fortunately passed away in the more enlightened centers of learning; but it has not yet come to pass within the memory of man that youth is trained after seven years of Greek to take up and read with ease and pleasant mastery any Greek writer whatsoever, however simple the syntax and vocabulary. Few men enter college with ability to read well at sight; and yet, if he fails to read well on entrance, a man may confidently despair of marked progress in that direction thereafter.

Here, then, lies the trouble: the manner of presentation. The greatest enemies to the enthusiastic study of Greek are the teachers themselves. They must not put the blame on the shoulders of science; they must own to a lack of humanistic interest. Men like J. H. Wright, B. I. Wheeler, Basil Gildersleeve, and Paul Shorey merely prove that technique need not overwhelm interpretation, and that the greatest scholarly attainments need not stand in the way of that finer sense of human values which inspires a student with an enthusiasm for the content of his subject lasting the rest of his days. The great majority of teachers, however, have qualified for their positions through some technical excellence in philology or archæology upon which the doctorate affixes the seal of learned approval; they have qualified, not through wide reading at first hand, nor through the quality of making their field intellectually indispensable because of their personality. Thus it happens that the literary and æsthetic are subordinated to the structural

and syntactical, until we have the spectacle of a course on the *Republic* turned into a carnival of moods and tenses.

Nevertheless, in spite of the decline caused in and out of the ranks of professed advocates, Greek is still read with pleasure by those who would not willingly let a beautiful possession pass forever out of their lives, once they have known its wayward glances, its rapturous music, its imperishable subtlety of insight. Its literature is luxury itself for diversity and extent; its mythology has charmed and vivified every poet of distinction whom it has touched; its religion has written itself through modern theology. And, with all the glamour of achievement, the instrument itself is as fresh as the day it sang on the lips of the rhapsode. The immense difficulty of Greek is often urged against its pursuit. No language in the world is more tolerant of intimacy upon the slight acquaintance of a year. The Retreat of the Ten Thousand never offered such difficulties as the Gallic campaigns, nor is Homer ever so perplexing (although in dialect) as the perfectly polished Virgil. If in our schools we had reversed the order of Greek and Latin, the latter would prove the more difficult and, as now, the less worthy of continued study for purposes of culture.

Now, passing by the question of comparative difficulty as of little moment, what mental faculties are best trained in reading Greek? They are three in number: memory, imagination, and judgment. With two of these every youngster is born, while the third is only slowly evolved. Remembering that our aim in the study of language should be the learning to read, read, read, we must not divert our energies overmuch to structure of words or modes of thought-process. Still we must memorize the most important paradigms of nouns and verbs, and, above all, master about eight hundred words for our working vocabulary. If carried on with constant attention to association in groups or roots, this will require and strengthen memory, our first and fundamental faculty. As our experience is young, our expeditions into the unknown with this equipment demand an adventuring, darting, resourceful, inconsequential disposition. This faculty abounds so liberally that parents, mistaking its function, foolishly repress it on moral grounds. I refer to the imagination. Closely allied, but totally different in office, comes the third and last evolved faculty, the judgment—the cautious, deliberative, selective power which arbitrates when the imagination supplies several candidates for the proper meaning. Thus the imagination is kept from waywardness and the judgment from narrowness.

Somebody may ask, however, why should we claim that Greek alone educates these faculties, why the modern languages are not entitled to the same high place. The modern languages, on account of their practical advantages, will always be widely studied, and it must be granted that in the practice of sight-reading they doubtless train the same faculties in much the same way; but they are defective because they are too close to our own modes of thought, expression, and form. The alien form of the Greek letters themselves makes the learner elastic in mastering them. The compounding of words, too, gives it a richness of vocabulary

approached by no language save German, which it ever exceeds in lightness. Again, the variety in inflections, endowing the noun-forms with myriads of colors and the verb-forms with a picturesque restlessness as of the sea they loved so well, is matched in no other language. In brief, the subtlety, the swift changes, the strange harmonies, are as distinctly endless in suggestiveness as Hellenic sculpture. And as form of body has never been more beautifully expressed, so no people have ever written or talked with more regard to artistic finish or with lovelier grace of motion.

Finally, no great master in the art of written expression but has been markedly better for the direct influence of Greek; while no later man of distinction or genius without it but has suffered, perhaps, from lack of that calm of self-control, that ease of climax, that profound concern for absolute perfectness, with which the Greek always impresses the true student and makes him conscious, in a profounder sense than ever, how justly the Greeks regarded those ignorant of that language as barbarians. If the study of Greek could reveal to a mind no writers except Homer and Sophokles, he would have in these (if he has a soul) the sources of never-failing refreshment and wonder. This, however, Greek can never mean until the student resolves to work out his salvation apart from the faulty modern methods of teaching, or until reading is bred into him from the earliest possible moment. From disconnected, manufactured sentences you soon acquire a hesitant habit of mind which renders you panic-stricken before a long, lazy stretch of narrative. Let classical masters insist on making the ability to read at sight the object of prime importance in Greek and Latin, and we shall have within twenty years a body of enthusiastic humanists in America capable of holding their own in a more efficient way with the great traditions of Germany, France, and England.

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